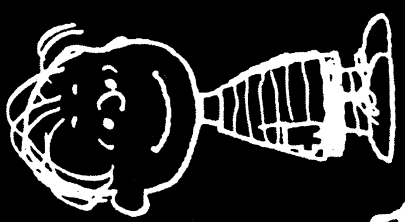

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Urs Lehni (UL) & Olivier Lebrun (OL)

Urs Lehni is a Zurich-based graphic designer and the founder of Rollo Press. Olivier Lebrun is a Paris-based graphic designer. The two have become close collaborators after working together on Lebrun's bootlegged *A Pocket Companion to Books from The Simpsons* which became an instant hit in the art book world as well as with fans of the TV show. They later collaborated on a "monograph" for the French graphic designer Bernard Chadebec, composed of 1:1 prints of his poster works. Both Lehni and Lebrun share a background in skateboard culture which has since permeated into ideologies around publishing, access, and community. Both seem to view their ideas as more urgent than precious, taking on a zine-like approach to publishing and distribution centered on working with and releasing projects for a loyal fanbase and community of friends. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

> BS: Both Urs and Olivier, to begin with, I'm curious about your general understanding of or relationship to bootlegging.

OL: For me, it begins with my background in skateboarding and in music. It's maybe a habit that we

acquired through being a part of these cultural practices. I don't think it was ever on purpose, maybe just a natural way for us to affirm our references.

UL: Definitely. Growing up with skateboarding has provided us with a loose understanding of authorship. I think in this culture people generally have been quite generous with sharing content. I think we were just infused with that kind of attitude during our adolescence and it provided us with a pretty blurry idea of authorship, what's up for grabs, what's sacred, where you're not allowed to go or what you're not allowed to touch. I don't have a clear distinction between bootlegging, appropriation, and pirating. There is also open source, which is something that I find really interesting in graphic design, which is almost non-existent. I think with any project, you can either start from scratch or you can see what's already there, and for me, the latter is the thing that interests me. I would like my work to feel like it's embedded in a culture or a history and not so much something I did from scratch. I'm interested in things that look like they are found rather than made.

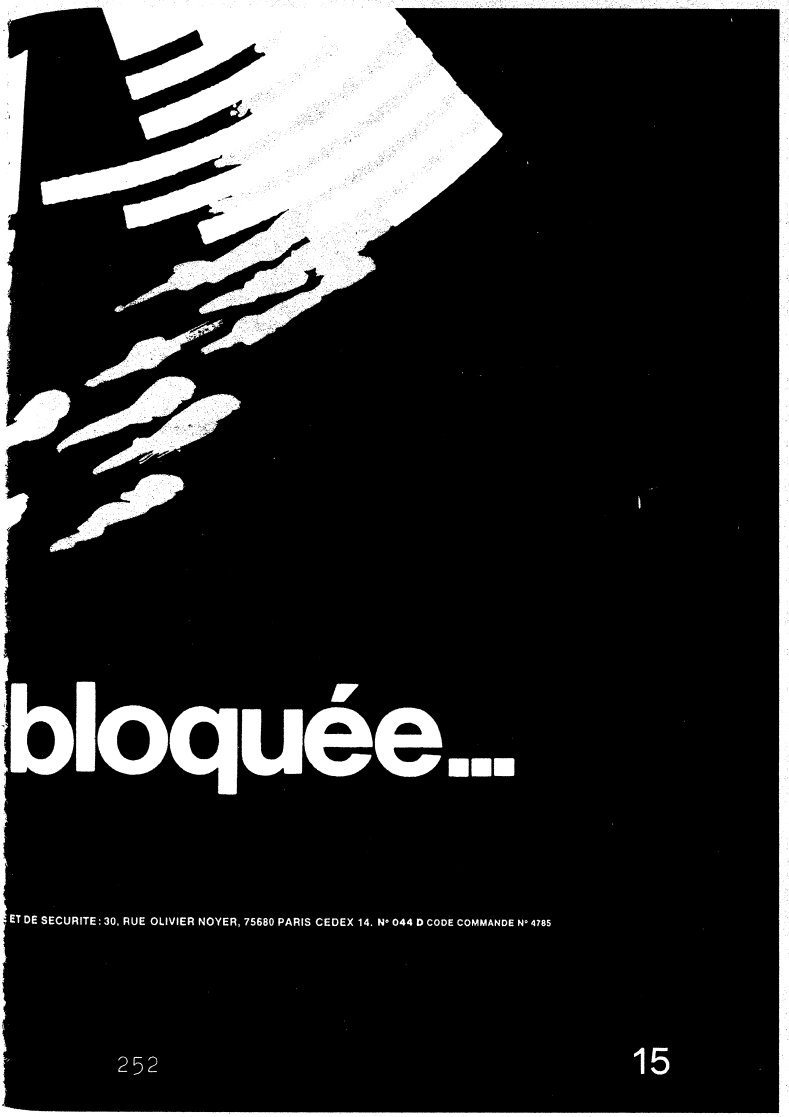
BS: Bootlegging is of course tied to this idea of smuggling. If we think about smuggling in graphic design, we can think about moving between different cultural spheres: high and low culture, the "vernacular" and the "arts." This seems to be a common interest for the two of you, looking at "low culture," and through the design/publishing process, bringing it into the realm of "high culture." Why does this interest you, or what effect do you think this has?

OL: I think Urs and I are generally interested in things outside of design. We have this whole chat of images that aren't necessarily design-related. I'm really interested in this idea where people aren't totally aware that what they are doing is design; the results are much more interesting. I am not opposed to contemporary graphic designers who are trying to push the practice forward, but I've always viewed graphic design as my work and not my lifestyle. I've had people advise me to let go of my background in skate culture or be critical of it, and for that reason I'm not so interested in being a part of a certain design community. I'm not trying to match skills with the top graphic designers, I'm interested in using design to work with all of these other things I enjoy.

UL: I think Olivier and I both have one foot in the scene and the other one outside of it. We are skeptical of a too canonical way of making design—I find these ideas very troublesome and also very boring. In Switzerland, we have a lot of tradition, and theres still so many schools that rely on a set of principles that were established in the 1940s and 1950s. I'm always shocked, and to a certain extent also disgusted, that this is still attractive, without looking at the ideological package that these aesthetics come with.

I think a lot of my practice is opposing this and trying to find positions that are outside of it. This ideology might not really be at the forefront of the practice and it's not supplemented by critical readings or texts, it's more through action. It's by publishing small stimulators that are outside of a certain

pp. 322–325: Bernard Chadebec, *Intrus Sympathiques* (2016)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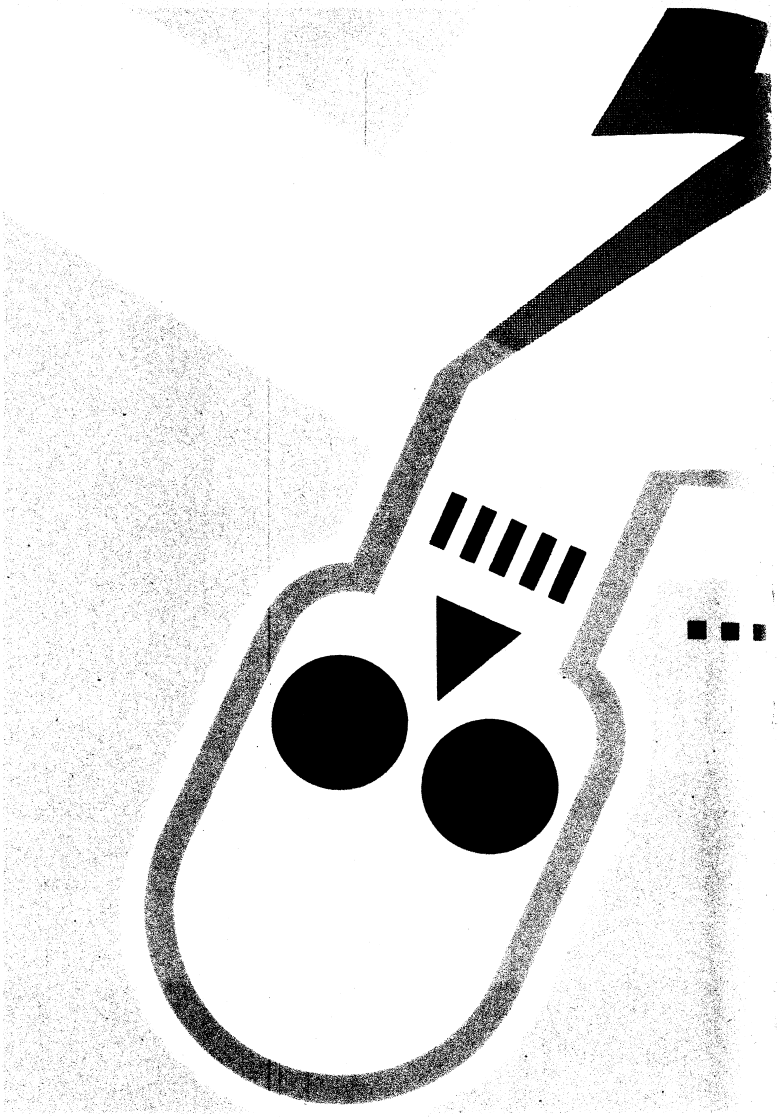


325 Urs Lehni & Olivier Lebrun

canon. I think the [Bernard] Chadebec book is a good example of this because it's just a guy who worked for the industry in a way; he's the French poster designer who has probably reached the highest print runs with his work, but nobody in the design scene ever talked about him because his stuff was just hanging in factories. We were curious as to why nobody has written about him or shown his work.

> BS: On a related note, both of you have spoken before of the influence of Hans-Rudolf Lutz. In the States, he's surprisingly and sadly obscure. His work seems to resonate with this interest in "low culture" and the spirit of bootlegging. Can you both talk about his influence on your own practice? and sadly obscure. His work seems to resonate with this interest in "low culture" and the spirit of bootlegging. Can you both talk about his influence on your own practice?

UL: My first contact with his work was because he was a teacher at the school where I was studying. I didn't have him as a teacher because he got sick the year before I went there. When he died he left this huge vacuum; everybody would talk so highly of him. About a year later after his death, the school decided to make an exhibition in his honor, and a teacher gave us the option to help with the show.

Throughout this process, I was able to look at almost everything that he had done in his professional life. Since then, I mean, I'm not a specialist on his work, but I've collected a little bit and I have a lot of contact with Tania Prill, who is his widow and is in charge of his archive.

I think Lutz is also this kind of figure. If you're at the design museum in Zurich and you have a Wolfgang Weingart exhibition, then you should have a Lutz exhibition. I really question why we haven't seen this; we should have a major monograph of his work at this point. He and Weingart are to me the really interesting Swiss postmodernists. One is kind of a technical virtuoso and is exploring in a more formal and aesthetic way. The other has a really broad cultural idea of design, is very active on the political left, is organizing exhibitions with posters from Cuba, and is in a way an outspoken communist and anticapitalist. His broader understanding of design, looking at it as something that is not exclusively done by a field of professionals, I find so contemporary, especially at a moment when we're seeking a more inclusive or participatory field. If you look at his hieroglyphics book, it seems to be in direct opposition to the ideas of Swiss modernist Otl Aicher, where there was a desire to find one way of saying Apple, or toilet. Lutz showed us that there are so many more ways to communicate. I find it fascinating. His way of taking a newspaper and deconstructing it into different parts and finding this immense pleasure in this universe that is so narrow and quotidian—he just goes in there and finds all this amazing stuff.

OL: When I saw the issue of *Typografie Monatsblätter* made by Lutz, I thought it was brilliant, a total skater attitude. With his hieroglyph book, today you could almost see it being some sort of Instagram account and the magic is lost. There is something really nice about the way he collected things from the street over time, or the way he blew up the raster image from the newspaper; he was just so full of śur-

prise. I definitely found him to be an interesting and inspiring figure to look to for inspiration. I'm telling you, Urs and I rarely chat about design, but today we were talking about Virgil Abloh...

UL: Did you interview him by the way?

BS: I've been trying to...

OL: For me, it's very surprising. I didn't see the guy coming, and now he's doing everything from fashion to skateboarding. I recently read a text in *Real Review* that talked about how brands like Fuct and Stussy were built up with bootlegging, and now it's all moving to high fashion and no one can afford it. That part of it, I don't like. I'm beginning to think bootlegging is just becoming a trend and will eventually collapse.

UL: [Abloh] has this 3% rule, where if you do something and it differentiates from the original by 3% you can claim that it's your own. I remember these sorts of disputes in type design, and there I think the number was 5%. I wonder how you can even measure this?

BS: This need to claim ownership feels antithetical to the whole idea of bootlegging...

OL: Both ethically and politically I'm very much against this way of working. We've seen a lot of bootlegs in the fashion world that have co-opted skate culture. It has a lot to do with power and money; I remember a high fashion label that appropriated work from the brand Santa Cruz and would sell the products for such high prices, and these original graphics were made by a small team struggling to stay afloat.

I don't mean to make a political statement about our work, but we really do try to make things affordable, we're not so interested in capitalizing on profits with our work. I think it goes back to the way things freely circulated and were traded in skate communities.

UL: You're right, it's about accessibility. Bootlegging now feels like the opposite of what it was in the past; rather than make something more affordable, it's more expensive. We don't want anyone to think twice about whether or not they can afford our books.

> BS: Bootlegging and community are inherently linked. On one hand, you have communities that make the bootlegs. On the other, you have bootlegs that might create, preserve, or become emblematic of specific communities. Could you each speak to your relationship between publishing and community?

OL: Rollo has an amazing community. I was so happy to have *The Simpsons* book come out on Rollo, it was like the music label I always wanted to be on. I also identified with the other publications and practices that Rollo supported, and they were supportive of the simple idea of having fun making books and having fun reading books. But really Rollo is a community — you have Stefan Marx, Linus Bill. I suppose what made me excited is that these were all people Urs was close with, so it felt like being part of a gang or a team. Having *The Simpsons* book there really allowed me to be welcomed into this community.

I also appreciate how these books end up as a part of a much larger community, on my bookshelf

for example. I like how *The Simpsons* book falls in between Dieter Roth and Baldessari or next to a comic book, it just felt like a missing link on my shelf, and I am interested in communicating with people with a similar understanding of this project. It also operates in between the idea of a fan zine and a book. Sometimes we make books that feel like fan zines and other times we make fan zines that feel like books, and I've always been really attracted to this ambiguity. I like that *The Simpsons* book seems to connect a lot of disparate communities—*Simpsons* fans, graphic designers, art book lovers, etc. It felt like a missing link, much in the same way Chadebec was a sort of missing link for Urs and I. I so often see these small communities as being so hermetic, and we are really interested in making connections between these different groups.

UL: I'm really happy that Rollo turned out the way it did. There was no strategy behind it; I just want to make things for my friends. In a weird way, this simple idea feels almost radical, but I don't understand why this should be. I never relied on the sales of those books for my personal life. I would try to keep it as a zero sum game, you know, it makes a bit of money, then you put a little money into it again. And now for the first time, I have a job at this school and I have a bit more financial stability than I used to have before. There's no economical strategy behind it, I don't want to get anywhere with it, it's just the pure pleasure of doing these things together with people I like.

> BS: I know Rollo started with a Riso, which perhaps set a precedent for the economic methods of production. Throughout Rollo's

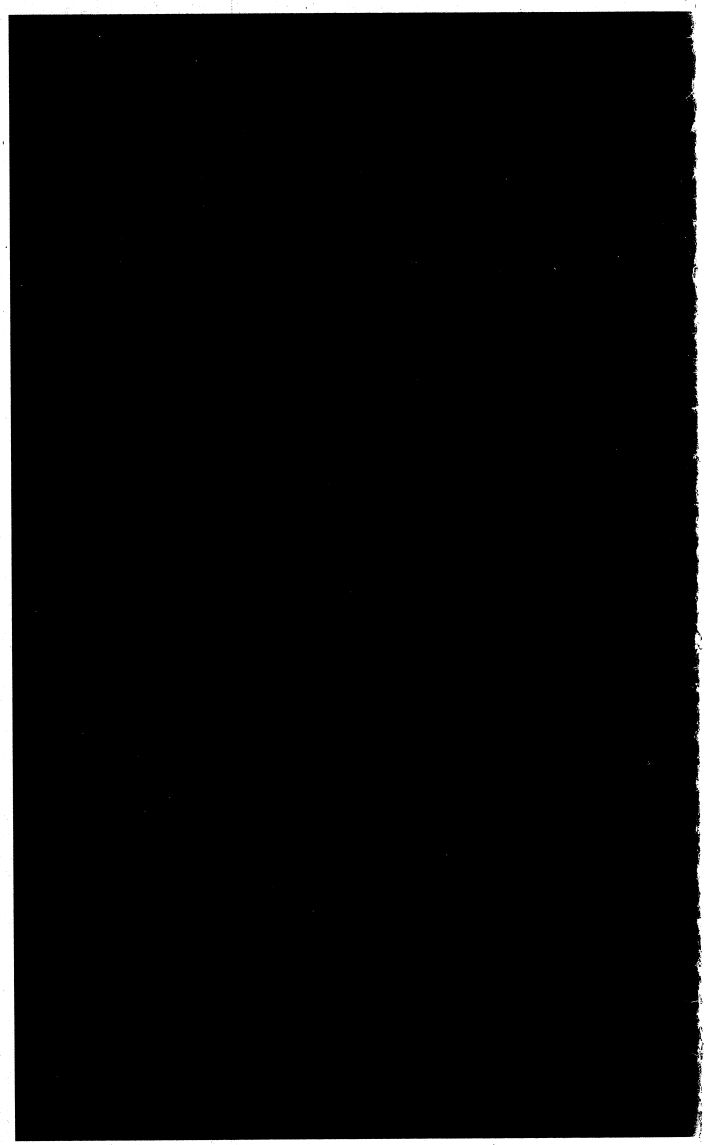
catalog, there is an underlying sense of raw, or straight forward, design and production. As the imprint has become established and highly respected, is this aesthetic still the result of economy, or do you think about it as a sort of Rollo "house style?" Do you feel there is a particular "aura" around this type of design? Is there a magic to something that feels found rather than designed?

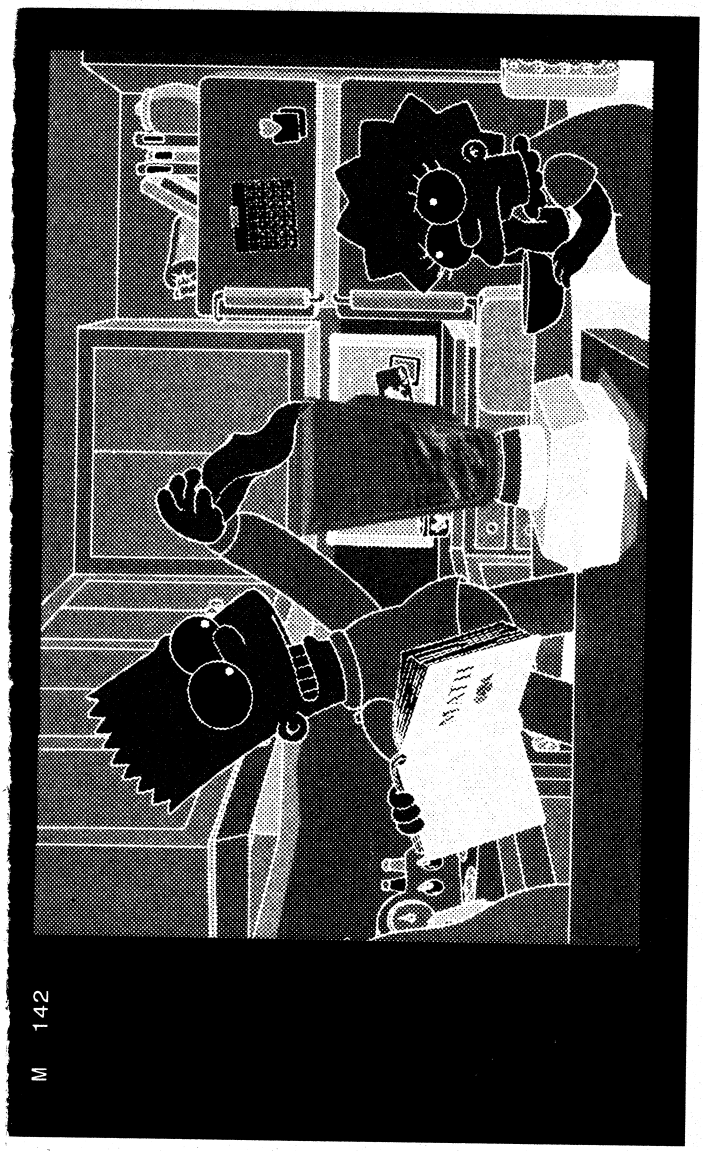
UL: The best-funded project we ever had was Chadebec, and it turned out a little bit more fancy than other titles. But in general, I guess this is also just linked to my own upbringing coming from the lower spectrum of a Swiss middle class family, and spending my youth skateboarding with a DIY mentality—this is what determines my pricing policy.

I really want things to be affordable and at the same time I'm also really interested in this mass market paperback aesthetic. In that sense, I think we are closely linked to some strands of conceptual art where you use some super mundane objects in order to disseminate your ideas or your content. You don't choose the handmade edition of twelve and charge hundreds of dollars for it. You want the thing to be out there and you want to produce it in the largest possible number. So I think that has informed a lot of design decisions in the end. With limited money, how can we make the most interesting object in the highest possible run.

BS: Speaking of authorship, several of Rollo's titles are reprints of lost, rare, or simply

pp. 332–335: *A Final Companion To Books From The Simpsons* (2018)

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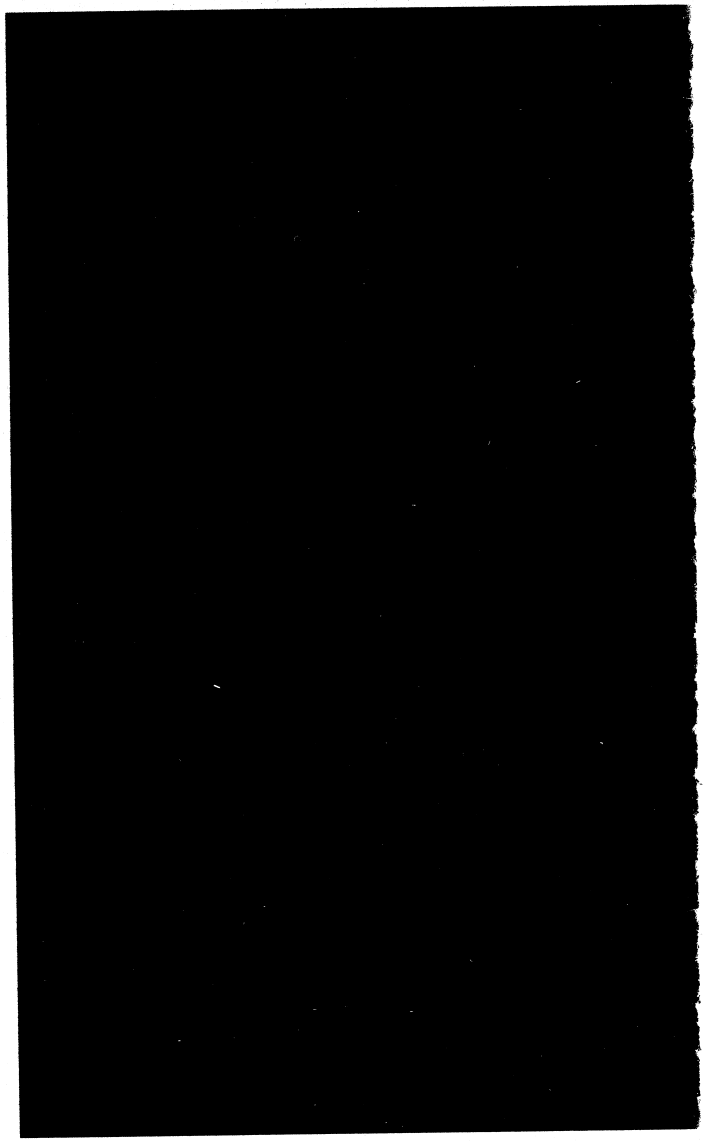

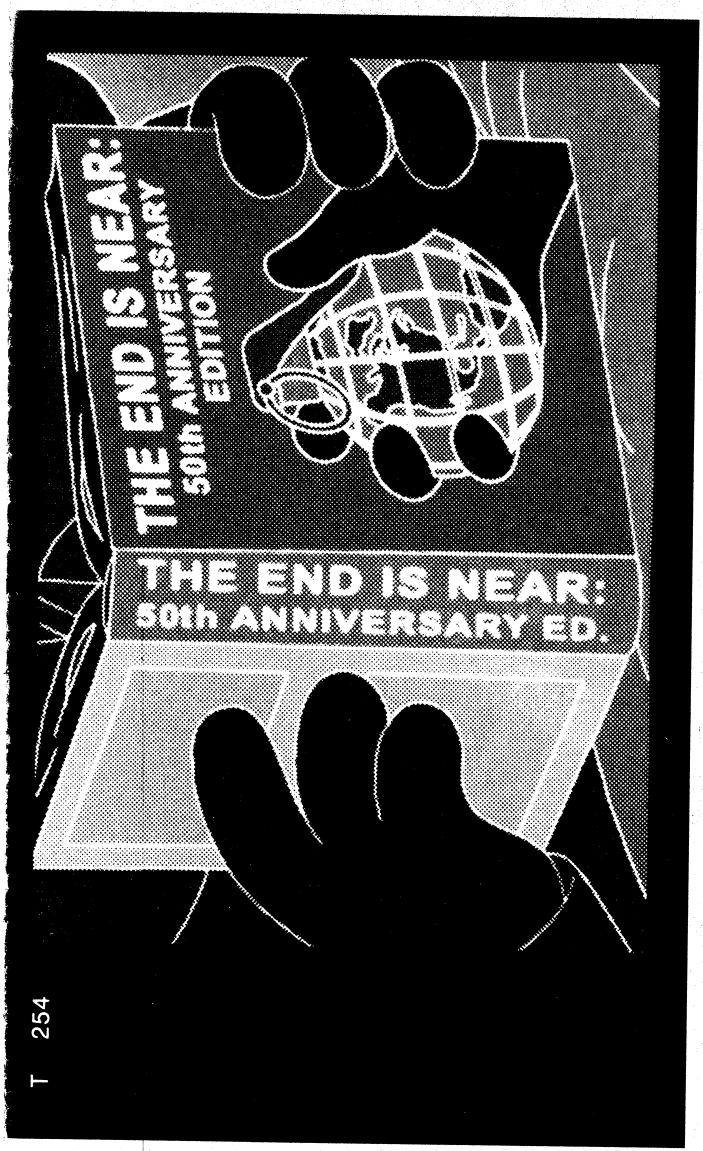
THE END IS NEAR:
50th ANNIVERSARY
EDITION
THE END IS NEAR:
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lesser-known historical works (*Xerox Book*, Ken Isaacs, et cetera). Regarding these reprints, have you ever had any issues with copyright? By publishing this sort of work, do you see it as a form of preservation? And lastly, is there an element of authorship in these reprints? I am thinking here of the way Walter Benjamin thinks of a translation: "An act midway between poetry and doctrine." In other words, is your goal to stay as close to the original as possible, or are you interested in some sort of transformation?

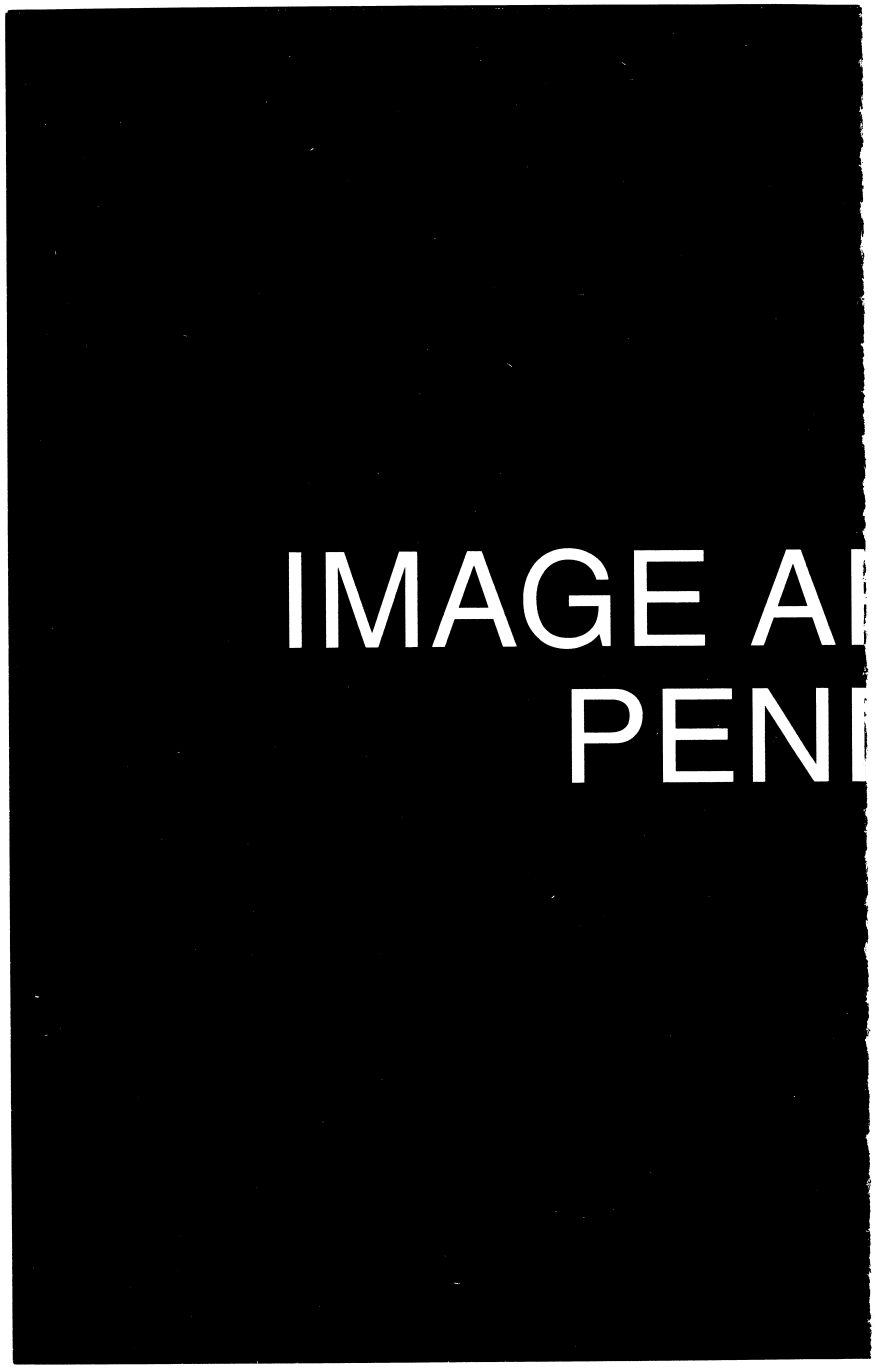
UL: We reprinted a Ken Isaacs book that I had ever seen in real life, so I don't know what it would mean to mimic the original as closely as possible. It was more like the idea of reenactment through making something available again that somehow disappeared. There wasn't any big conceptual gesture behind it, it was done in the context of an exhibition and there was a communal printing/binding room where everyone could make their own copy. We had some extra copies left, so I made the book available for trade—you could offer up anything in return for a book. We also reprinted Seth Siegelaub's *Xerox Book*, which was similarly linked to production. Maybe it was more of a stupid joke, but the *Xerox Book* is offset printed and I just figured someone should Xerox it.

OL: Working without so much emphasis on authorship opens up the roles I can play as a designer. I'm always interested in being involved in much more than just putting together the final outcome. And by not being so concerned with authorship, it puts more

emphasis on the content. I see so many designers who also work as artists in some way, and there is always this battle of authorship. For me, that's completely the wrong way to think about work. I just want to use design to pay my rent and make sure my family is OK. Again, I look at Chadebec as an example, he was never concerned about being part of graphic design history, it was simply his job that he got paid five days a week to do.

> BS: Urs, you've mentioned the idea of open source as it's related to design. It's something that I feel is also related to bootlegging. Could you expand on this a bit?

UL: It's something that has been in the back of my head for a while, and it is something that was put in my head from the days of *Dot Dot Dot*. I think designers like Will Holder and Stuart Bailey, and later with David Reinfurt, they work a lot with templates such as the one they made for *Metropolis M* and later reused for other magazines. One problem I have with graphic design is that you always need to start from scratch, you know, you're almost like an artist who has to start with a blank canvas and come up with a brilliant idea. There's a history of like 500 years of books, and most are between A5 and A4, and have page numbers, and a container for the body text, et cetera. The principle and the problems have been almost identical over hundreds of years, so why don't we just make use of that knowledge and resources? A lot of it has to do with software; I'm 100% sure there will be a time when this monopoly is cracked open and we will be more willing to share our designs. Another problem that I have is with type design, which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is really playing into that field as well, because there is the possibility to use open-source licenses and then distribute typefaces in this way. So there you have this kind of software infrastructure, but nobody thinks to use it because you are doing something you can actually make millions from. Graphic design is interesting to me because it's always full of these worthwhile dilemmas. Nothing is clear, it's always blurry; there is always something to figure out.

> BS: I like the idea that a bootleg is more truthful in understanding a subject than any sort of original. That, by looking through the eyes of an admirer, we can know a subject on a more personal level. I'm curious if you feel the same way with publishing? Additionally, does your DIY method of production provide an additional lens through which you can understand a subject on a more intimate level?

OL: A bootleg often operates as an homage to the original. It's also a way of speaking to your audience, for example, when we used the Nirvana logo on the Yellow Pages shirt, we entered into a dialogue; we are winking at the community. With the recent Linus Bill book or with *The Simpsons* book, the design of each is meant to reframe the content in an unexpected way. *The Simpsons* book is modeled after an encyclopedia, so there is a slightly more dry or academic framing than you might expect. This is what I like most when Urs is designing something, there is al-

p. 341: Spines from various editions of *A Pocket Companion to Books from The Simpsons* (2012–2018)

LISA I PICK UP BOOKS LIKE YOU PICK UP BEERS.
HOMER THEN YOU HAVE A SERIOUS READING PROBLEM!

MARGE WELL, LET'S CHECK OUT THAT DISCOUNT BOOK WAREHOUSE.
HOMER BUT WE ALREADY OWN A BOOK!

Marge We're taking Maggie to the bookstore, so she can learn the way kids did between 1910 and 2002.

Marge Now, if you ladies recall what this place is supposed to be for!?
Lady Mm... Mm... Smokin' weed?
Marge Reading!

Marge DVDs, plush toys, crullers... I don't see many books.
Homer Yeah, the only actual books are coffee table books:
Barn Doors of Topeka,
Dogs Eating Ice Cream,
Jigsaw Puzzles with One Piece Missing,
Man-Killing Snakes of the Amazon...
Clerk Sir! Never say "Amazon" in a bookstore.

ways this idea of displacement which creates these unexpected encounters

UL: I'm not 100% sure that if I buy a bootleg book I get a better understanding of an original. Sam de Groot, for example, compiled and illegally published J.D. Salinger texts as a critical gesture and I'm not totally sure I felt any differently about Salinger. What I can say, though, is as a bootlegger, or somebody who finds a lot of joy and pleasure in re-enacting material from the past, I think it does help me to understand it in closer way. At the moment, I'm working on the reprint of *Today's Hieroglyphics* by Lutz and I have to kind of reverse engineer the project, and it allows me to look at the book from a totally different perspective. Not necessarily what's printed on the page, but the organization and the logic. A lot of it he did manually and with photo composition and cutting and gluing, and so when I do it in InDesign there are different tools being used to rebuild the spread.

That's something I really enjoy, to kind of stick your brain into somebody else's brain and figure out how he or she did something. There is a real learning process that is happening there, and it's how I learned about so much. There is a sort of embodied element to it, you have to actually go through the process, and I think when you do that there is a lot to be gained. Maybe in a future curriculum in an art school there should be a class... "okay Monday morning, time to get to bootlegging 101..."

BS: We've been speaking a lot here about bootleg objects, but I'm also interested in how bootlegging might transcend objects.

How can we think of bootlegging as a mindset or methodology? Do either of you have thoughts on how the act might evolve in this way in the future?

OL: I think it's a fantastic way to show your sources and recirculate information again. There is also power in its ability to provide accessibility. I really can't say much about the future, but my optimism points towards bootlegging as a way to continuously recirculate resources, even if these sorts of activities are transferred to a medium like Instagram. Right now, the hype around bootlegging feels like a trend, and one that will pass. But I think it will continue to exist in smaller communities and help resurface stories that might have otherwise been lost, and interrupt these very linear histories that we gravitate to.

UL: Yeah, I think of bootlegging like a virus that mutates, but I think it has to emancipate itself from what it was before. There is this organic quality to the gesture that somehow always manages to slip away and go under the radar.

Title page (p. 318): Cover of *Kranke Kinder* by Linus Bill published by Yellow Pages (2021) run by Urs Lehni and Olivier Lebrun